

THE SEASON: personal connection

The Christmas season of 2015 began before it began, which is to say that a subtle, unknowable mix of vague planning and serendipitous events would somehow come together to shape an unexpectedly special family gathering that particular season. And it all began well before the joyous day itself, when my **wife** determined that hook or crook, we were going to have her sister and her family from Nevada, whom we had not seen in many years, share Christmas with us in Pennsylvania. Initially, this seemed utterly unlikely to happen, largely due to the cost restraints of flying a husband, wife and two children to the east coast, no less at a time when the family's **financial situation** had taken a sobering downturn. And little, of course, did my wife wish to burden her sister with the added stress and needless expense of gift purchases.

This was also the same year our only daughter had gone off to college, in Florida, and we were eagerly anticipating her first homecoming, if you will, given her new-found collegiate independence. The parental/teenage relationship had become increasingly strained in those months preceding her departure for her freshman year. By the time of her leaving, the friction between my wife and daughter had become especially intense, as independence seemed to want to burst out of its shell before its time, like a baby bird eager to fly away before its wings are fully formed. We hoped, as Christmas approached, that time had done its healing and all of that was behind us now.

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Comment [1]: Name?

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Comment [2]: Was he (or she) a realtor?
robert provitera 2/6/17 4:22 PM
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Curiously, as all of this was happening, my wife and her sister's budding 14-year-old daughter began to discover from a distance that they had so much in common, and so much to talk about, that they began to believe this was going to be the best Christmas ever; that somehow, some way, a family trip to Pennsylvania for the holidays was indeed going to happen, no matter how impossible it seemed. Like benign coconspirators, the young hopeful and my wife surreptitiously researched fun and affordable winter Christmas activities in our little nook of Monroe County, nestled along the Delaware River. Her sister's two children, who had never seen snow before, now had visions of a Pennsylvania winter wonderland.

Then miraculously, a real estate transaction in the final hour suddenly afforded them the means, and late on a December night, just as my wife and I were dozing off to sleep, she got the excited call from her niece.

"We're coming out to be with you for Christmas!" she squealed, so loudly I too could hear her through the earpiece.

It was the call my wife had expected all along, as only faith comprehends. The four relatives from Nevada would be here just in time for Christmas. So the season was shaping up to be one like we had never seen.

As the meal and activity planning now began in earnest, our daughter called to tell me about a sorority sister from California whose family was going through a vicious divorce. She told me cautiously that her friend had two mothers, and that she never knew her dad. He was a sperm donor that one of her mothers had picked out. The relationship hadn't gone well, apparently and for years, this friend had

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stayed away, first at prep school and now at college, and now she did not want to return to California during the break, and amid the fighting.

“Dad,” my daughter asked, “Can she stay with us for the Holiday?”

I discussed it with my wife, but there was really no debate: we immediately added another guest.

Knowing her own family’s conservatively traditional values as well as her friend’s liberal history, my daughter began to prepare both parties for an impending experience in, let’s call it, diversely contrastive cultures. There was never any concern that this might upset the harmony of the celebration: We understood our daughters concerns and her friend reportedly assured our daughter, “I know how to do parents,” whatever that precisely means!

If that weren’t enough, both of my handicapped parents, who reside with us in our home, would also naturally be present at the festivities, making the eclectic holiday mix one to remember. Finally, add in our thoughtful grown son, who had recently gifted my recently stroke-surviving mom a tablet with software that could potentially become her primary means of communication. That gift and its presentation brought even my brother in law—a hard-nosed (but compassionate) retired Chicago police officer—to tears.

After Christmas the gang decided to see a movie, and because our visiting nephew had less than his share of influence over the list of activities, mostly cooking, baking and girl talk, we let him pick the movie. He is a bit older than his sister and has military aspirations, so he wanted to see Angelina Jolie’s “Unbroken,” a movie of hope and redemption about a war hero and POW survivor. My wife and I

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Comment [5]: Age at the time?

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Comment [6]: Did it do so in fact?

are no longer in the habit of going to the movies, not since the days of our daughter's fascination with all of those animated Disney films which have long flown by. But of course we agreed to go along on what we anticipated would be a delightful family activity. Here is where the story turns.

We knew the theme of the movie before we took our seats, and as such, we were also well aware that along with "hope and redemption" there would necessarily be some grim scenes depicting hardship, despair and human cruelty. We were prepared for this, but, as all theatergoers probably tend to be, we were blissfully unmindful of the fact that within the confines of the theater at that moment, we were also "captive" as audience members subject to the trailers and program material presented by the medium in which we were immersed in an almost literal sense. More broadly, we became a captive audience to whatever content messages the creators on the onscreen media wished us to see.

The first movie "preview" trailer began. As the sounds grew in volume and the pace of images in front of us accelerated, our young guests began to redirect their attention away from the smaller images on their smart phones. The big screen and romantic music lulled us into what initially appeared to be the beginning of an interesting love story. The actor was charming, handsome, wealthy, well dressed and very attentive to his leading lady actress. As engrossed as I was becoming, I noticed that my wife and the young ladies with us seemed to be drawn even deeper into the screen, as if being hypnotized into a trance. The actor on appearances looked to be all any girl could ever hope for, as vignettes depicted the leading lady's girlfriends encouraging her on beyond her doubts and further into the relationship.

But then suddenly, before any of us in our theater seats had realized what was happening, we became voyeurs into the bedroom of a perverse bondage enthusiast and his courted female “slave” sadistically bound captive to his mental, emotional and physical chains, and to his sexual whims as well. When we entered the theater, we had no way of knowing we were about to experience the provocative images, sounds and allurement that many women across the country have read in the pages of the book, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, and now many more have seen in the form of a full length feature film produced by a major American film company. Nor especially, could we have expected something so incongruously leading into our selected movie, which documents the actual torturous entrapment of a POW held captive against his will. My wife and I looked at each other simultaneously and without words, but rather through the inexplicable telepathy that close spouses often seem to possess, we were able to share the thought that we would discuss later that evening, when all the others had gone to bed.

An age old question has been kicked around by philosophical scholars, creative artists and social scientists since the days of the ancient Greeks and beyond, concerning art, society and their reciprocal powers of influence on one another. Today with media written large and powerful as our most prominent and pervasive form of art, communication, entertainment—and even obsession—we might now reiterate the question: Does media imitate culture or does culture imitate media?

Not long before that Christmas movie experience, I was listening to a podcast by Dr. Ravi Zacharias from his series *Let My People Think*, in which he retold the story (originally related by *Malcolm Muggeridge*) of a cardiologist who was asked to

write as precisely as possible about what having a heart attack *actually feels like* from a doctor's perspective. Even further however, because this physician had just survived a serious heart attack himself, it was thought that such a commentary emanating from actual experience and narrated by an individual who also intimately understood the underlying physiology might be uniquely insightful or revelatory.

The doctor wrote that throughout his life, as we all do, he had experienced head aches and broken bones, cuts and bruises and other minor injuries, but with each there was the perspective that he was somehow the discrete observer of the event and thus was able to distinguish or distance himself from the pain, but as he was experiencing the heart attack, because the heart is the source that pumps the blood throughout the body, it was as if he *was* the pain itself; he was unable to separate himself from it. He said he was inside the pain as if he and the pain were essentially one-and-the-same phenomenon.

This, Ravi Zacharias commented, is how we as a culture are so intrinsically connected to media today. We are living it. We have moved from art imitating life through a phase of life imitating art, and now to life being inside of art. Life and art are now one with each other. Media surrounds our lives, it immerses us, perhaps overwhelmingly. Today, we live **inside** the media culture.

Malcom Muggeridge told another true story of a visit overseas during which he was witness to a public execution by firing squad. He recalled the loud verbal command, so often imitated in the movies, of "Ready, Aim,..." and then a sudden macabre halt to the proceedings when abruptly a cameraman yelled, "Cut! My battery died!" The actual execution of a human being went into pause mode until the

battery was replaced, and then the command began again, "Ready, aim, *FIRE!*" What a real world illustration of the heightened level of importance that we have allowed our media to take in our world today, that a tangential film crew might spare a man's life for the space of time it might take to replace a camera battery, and then dispassionately record his death only moments later. We are indeed "in it."

And what of such media manipulation? Was the showing of the trailer for *Fifty Shades of Grey* ahead of the feature film *Unbroken*, juxtaposing images of two distinctly different forms of "bondage" simply a bizarre coincidence, or did the creators of this particular media have a sub-textual message in mind for their captive audience. Within the sophistication of our modern electronic, digital and instantaneous information age, there is very little that is done, that is not done deliberately or without a further underlying purpose, whether genuinely harmless or decidedly malicious.

THE BIND

A few short weeks after the in-laws, the friends, the Christmas decorations and my daughter were gone, our household had returned to its new norm of relative quiet. Until one evening I returned home to find my wife huddled on the couch in a deeply agonizing phone conversation with my daughter. The tone already ominous seemed to change into a degree of alarm with my arrival, as I overheard my wife say "I have to tell your father," just before she hung up the phone. What I found out next hit me with the enormous weight of an entire culture collapsing around our family in a devastating instant.

I would find out that our daughter, in the presumed safety of her college environment and amid professional educators, mentors and coaches, had been kidnapped, bound, gagged and abused by one of those self-same caretakers, an assistant coach employed by the university, and had barely managed, through her own courageous determination to free herself and escape with her life.

Horrified, I immediately ran into my office and booked a flight to her before I had any idea of what I would do or say when I got there. I just knew I needed to get there, to get to my daughter as soon as technology could get me there—and just

Bring. Her. Home. Traveling alone was a forced isolation with a window seat to my thoughts which flew between: Family, fatherhood, adolescence, childhood, movie trailers, work, reality, perception and the future. I knew we were at a tipping point as a culture and now also as a family damaged by that culture. Like a heart attack, we were now personally inside the pain, and in some ways continue to be so. How did we descend into such a dark place and how do we move through this despair to a place of hope and restoration? These were the whirlwind of thoughts that carried me to my daughter's campus.

Like a good public education student, I tried to keep my ideas in separate rooms of equal importance while I visited them, but I knew that despite that process that schooled me, there was and there remains an inescapable interrelatedness among all of these things. I would spend the journey home trying to connect the dots.

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Comment [7]: Note: did you tell me that the perpetrator believed that what he did was somehow acceptable behavior?

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Comment [8]: Accurate to say?

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Comment [9]: Did your daughter return home with you or stay at school? If so was there any pertinent conversation? Or if not I assume you were left alone to ponder the issues of culture, reality and media....?